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ABSTRACT

When used diagnostically at the readiness level, language-experience becomes an effective way to meet individual differences and to differentiate instruction in a group setting. For a 5- or 6-year old, school should be an exciting, happy, purposeful place, and language-experience lends itself well to such a setting. The first steps are to understand a child's strengths and needs and to plan appropriate strategies and activities that meet those needs. Language and verbal comprehension as well as experiential and cognitive growth are built into the language-experience to establish readiness for reading. Many first hand experiences--such as squeezing orange juice, popping popcorn, enjoying a visiting rabbit or other animal, participating in creative art activities, participating in simple construction activities and science projects or short field trips--play a role in developing language and experiential growth. Experiences are then reinforced with appropriate follow-up activities--such as listening to quality trade books; learning songs, poems, or finger plays; or responding to music through motion. Language-experience deals with a wide range of differences in the classroom and provides each child with the level of material best suited to his or her abilities and interests. Such an approach provides a nice balance of readiness activities. (HOD)

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Using Language-Experience to Teach Diagnostically at the Reading Readiness Level

K. Eleanor Christensen

Traditionally educators and parents have agreed that each child should "get off to a good start" in reading. Yet ideas on how best to achieve this goal are not as clear cut. Aukerman (1984) has listed more than 125 different ways to teach beginning reading. And Pikulski has asked, "How can a classroom teacher, usually a kindergarten or first grade teacher, deal with the concept of readiness with 30 or 60 children when the so-called experts can't agree?" (1978, p. 192.)

Pikulski recommends language-experience as a readiness tool. He is not alone. It is an easily justified approach for a variety of reasons, including the ideas that it supports the principles of learning, it teaches to strengths, it encompasses comprehension, and it can be used diagnostically. Stauffer, Hall, Allen, and a host of kindergarten and first grade teachers throughout the country have found it an excellent teaching strategy.

When used diagnostically at the readiness level, language-experience becomes an effective way to meet individual differences and to differentiate instruction in a group setting. Take the case of Jamie C. Once this child's strengths and needs were well understood, the next step was to plan appropriate strategies and activities through the language-experience approach to meet her needs. While all the children in her class were involved in language-experience, Jamie's activities were especially tailored for her. Some of these activities she did individually, others she did with children whose needs were similar to hers. And the other children in her classroom also received instruction differentiated to their needs. Such is the stuff of truly diagnostic teaching.

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In Jamie's case, it so happened that she was given a variety of screening assessments during the second half of her kindergarten year. Jamie's teacher already knew her abilities quite well from informal diagnosis during their language-experience periods together, but the more formal testing supported and added to the general information available about Jamie. From the testing instruments it appeared that Jamie was operating within the bright range of intelligence. She was above average in social maturity and she had a very good attitude about reading. She was learning to dictate stories and enjoy language experience activities although this was not one of her greatest strengths and in the future she would benefit greatly from many more such experiences. She enjoyed good children's literature. She did so well on a pre-phonics inventory that she was administered a phonics inventory usually reserved for primary grade children. On this, her control over rhyming words and single consonants was excellent and over consonant blends almost as good, while her level appropriate for instruction was consonant digraphs. She could name and print from dictation all the letters of the alphabet, but she had difficulty with the fine motor control necessary in printing. Jamie was neither an early reader nor a child at academic high risk, but rather a youngster with developmental reading needs similar to many kindergarten children.

What Jamie did not need was workbook or dittoed material on each letter of the alphabet. What she did need was a plan of readiness instruction using language-experience differentiated to her needs. The following program, developed for Jamie to meet these needs, emphasized these five areas of reading readiness: visual perception, visual-motor perception, auditory perception and discrimination, language and verbal comprehension, and experiential and cognitive growth. While many specific readiness skills were included in her program (i.e., left to right progression) they were inserted under those five major headings.

In the area of visual perception, Jamie was ready to work with letters and words which looked alike in dictated stories. Since she was not yet reading extensively, these activities were primarily of a readiness nature. Research recommends visual perception activities using letters, figures, words and phrases, rather than geometric shapes (Elkind, D. and Scott, L., 1962). What better media exists than dictated stories and a small word bank? These visual perception activities were reinforced with games such as "Concentration," "Simon Says," and "Hopscotch."

Jamie's visual-motor perception, while adequate, was not a strength. Fine motor activities still proved difficult for her. She benefited from copying letters and words from her dictated stories and word bank cards in a box of sand or salt or in using large colored chalk on a slate. As she gradually began to work with lined paper and a pencil, widely spaced lines and a large beginner's pencil were used.

While many other children in Jamie's class worked at readiness auditory perception and discrimination tasks, Jamie's well developed control over beginning consonants and blends as well as rhyming words indicated that she would most profit from instruction at a more difficult level. As she continued to dictate stories and occasionally add to her word bank, phonic instruction on consonant digraphs was provided. Since phonic instruction should be at an appropriate instructional level for each child, many other children in her class were more concerned with discrimination between sounds or in producing single consonant or consonant blends from their dictated stories. Jamie already had good control over these areas and so benefited more from appropriate instruction on consonant digraphs. Stories which she dictated provided her with key instructional words. With language-experience dictated stories, the teacher is able to reach a wide range of differences and levels in phonics and word recognition throughout the classroom. Jamie was asked to find words from her word bank that began with a growing number of consonant digraphs as well as to cut

words which matched these digraphs from newspapers and magazines. Finding additional words with digraphs in trade books also reinforced this skill.

While language and verbal comprehension as well as experiential and cognitive growth are both important facets of any readiness program, they are built into the language-experience approach to readiness for reading. Jamie was given many first hand experiences as part of the program, experiences which most often involved all five senses, and she was encouraged to talk with others and dictate material about these experiences. Most of these experiences were group activities, but diagnostic readiness activities were individualized for each child's needs. Squeezing orange juice, popping popcorn, enjoying a visiting rabbit or other animal, participating in creative art activities, simple construction activities, science projects, or short structured field trips, all played a role in developing both language and experiential growth. Experiences were reinforced with appropriate follow-up activities such as listening to appropriate quality trade books, learning songs, poems, or finger plays, responding to music through motion, and the like. For a 5- or 6-year-old, school should be an exciting, happy, purposeful place, and language-experience lends itself well to such a setting.

Language-experience has been used by many kindergarten and first grade children and teachers. It meets a wide range of differences in the classroom and provides each child with the level of material best suited to his or her abilities and interests. Good teachers work diagnostically with language-experience providing a balance of readiness activities appropriate for each child through this approach. Children can move rapidly or slowly, as their own pace demands. It is a program which teaches to strength—there are no failures in kindergarten with the language-experience approach to readiness and reading. Kindergarten and first grade are as they should be, happy and profitable places where each child is taught diagnostically and gains his reading experiences in his own best way.

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